

Future unknown for M'ville cemetery

Story and photos by John R. Ghrist

MERRILLVILLE — Who would think that underneath a pile of old oil drums, lumber, and thick underbrush, lies a roadside cemetery teaming with Lake County history?

Intriguing? Yes, it is.

Until recently, all we knew about this lost cemetery was a couple of short paragraphs compiled by Crown Point Daughters of the American Revolution Avis Brown, Francis McBride and Mary Lou Vanderlaan some time ago.

These enterprising women, perhaps a step ahead of their time, labored many years in preparing the most complete cemetery records available today for Lake County.

But even before their work began, I am convinced that elements like vandalism, weather, and progress caused irreplaceable records and markers to disappear, hiding forever the location and identity of many oldtime residents.

Today, the only evidence we have of some people is a name on census rolls. Two good examples would be Richard Fancher and David Wood.

Fancher was a great grandfather of mine, going way back and the first claimant to the Lake County Fairgrounds and to Fancher Lake. This information was released in a series of stories which appeared last summer in the Star-Register Newspapers.

David Wood's grave also is missing. He was a great grandfather to Burdette Wood of West Joliet Street here in Crown Point.

Both men may have been buried in Luther's Grove before the land was turned over to build Crown Point High School.

These are two persons whose graves are lost. It is a good example of what may happen to the Holzworth family cemetery plots, too.

A statement by the late Lake County historian Timothy Ball bears repeating at this point. "Some of us have not done all we could have in preserving from desecration our pioneer dead."

And as time moves on, more of our early history will disappear if something is not done, to give what we now know to our next generation. Such is the case of the remains of the Holzworth Cemetery, located on half acre off Merrillville Road on 82nd Place in Merrillville. Its existence is known by few people.

Intrigued by the nature of the place and its mystery, I was determined to find out more about it.

My hopes are to convince the present heirs of the cemetery to deed it to the Ross Township trustee for future upkeep.

So, poised with a curious pen, and a keen interest in early Lake County History,

my research was begun. Collaborating on this project was Debby Wharton, and Lyle Warrick of the Lake County Reference Library, and Mrs. Walter Catlow of the Ross Township assessor's office. Again on this study, various county records and offices were also consulted.

Today's Lake County assessment records indicate that the cemetery is still the property of one Gottlieb Holzworth, who died sometime around 1890. He is listed in the 1860 through 1880 Ross Township census records, but not in 1900.

He was apparently still in the area after 1880, because he recorded numerous land transactions that are found in old county records. The 1890 census was destroyed in a fire at the National Archives in Washington, DC sometime ago. So they could not be consulted for further information on his household.

Gottlieb's name is still on the property. Even after he sold off most of his land before 1890, it was stipulated that all of the land would be transferred to each new owner except the wagon road which is now called 82nd Place, and the burial plot.

This is evident on the current day deed to the adjacent property. Heirs to the property probably took for granted that the land would always be a cemetery. One of the heirs, the late Wesley Waggonblast, often visited the cemetery and wondered about what would happen to it. Perhaps too, no one wanted the plot. So, Gottlieb Holzworth went to his grave still owning it.

The land is precisely .546 acres and is identified as key number 15-120-39. It has been untaxable for years. This

cemetery, commonly characterized as a typical family burial plot, contains only 4 known graves. This

may seem odd, but in those days, it was common for people to lay to rest their dead on their own property.

Some old farmhouses used to be located near by. Long-

time county employee Ben Brown, who worked at the fairgrounds for many years, recalls seeing a similar plot on Buck Hill back in the 1940s.

The identity of these graves as well as the stones themselves have since disappeared.

Barely readable on the four stones in the Holzworth Cemetery are the names of the following people...Catherine Holzworth, daughter of Mathias and Rosina, died Feb. 5, 1847, age 17.

Hannah Holzworth, daughter of Mathias and

Rosina, age 1 year, 6 months.

Magdalena Holzworth, also

a daughter of Mathias and

Rosina, who died Feb. 15, 1847.

Rosina, wife of Mathias who

died Oct. 6, 1856, at the age of

54. She was his first wife.

The three daughters, in-

cluding Hannah, could have

been the victims of an ac-

cident or disease. Diseases

like Black Diphtheria often

wiped out whole families then.

Such was the case in the

Thaddeus Fancher family in

which four children died of

this disease in October 1885.

This was documented in early

additions of the Star-Register

Newspapers.

The cemetery also contains

another curious stone with two initials on it. It sticks up precariously out of the ground and one could only guess what it represents.

Who was Mathias Holz-

worth?

The first appearance of the

Holzworth family in the area

of Ross Township is in the 1860

census. Mathias, the grand-

father of the family is listed as

54 years old. Born in Wur-

temberg, Germany, around

1798, Mathias is a wealthy

landowner, farming and

owning several hundred acres

in the Merrillville area. At one

time, according to old county

records, Mathias owned large

parcels of property around

West 49th Avenue, known as the Holzworth addition to Ross Township.

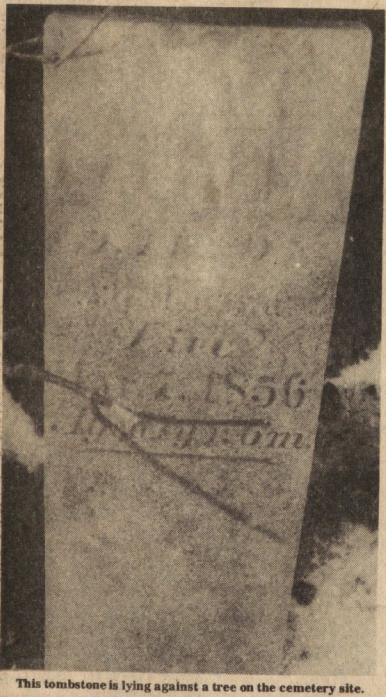
He also owned 13 acres of land that is now Liberty Park here in Crown Point. Later he sold this land to his son Gottlieb.

Also included in his possessions were numerous other lots around Lake County, including one lot in the Fancher addition to Crown Point at 115 S. Ridge Street. On this lot today is a home built in 1900, owned by Donald C. and June Woodke.

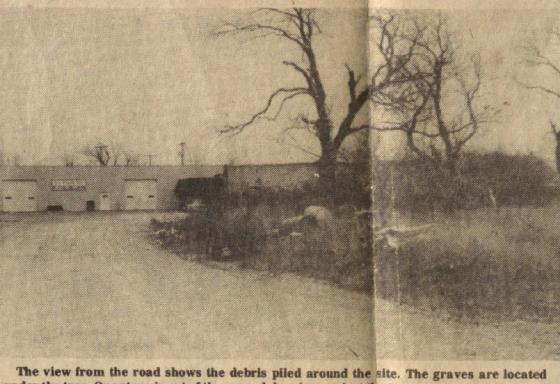
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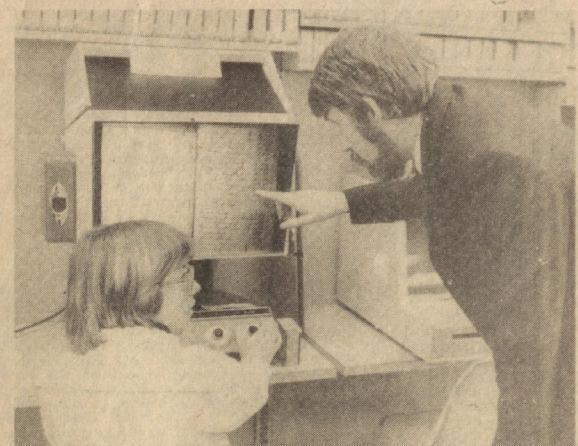
Two of the tombstones as they now lay. The larger stone is that of Catharine Holzworth who died Feb. 5, 1847, at age 17.



This tombstone is lying against a tree on the cemetery site.



The view from the road shows the debris piled around the site. The graves are located under the tree. One stone is out of the ground, leaning against the tree.



Lake County Reference Librarians Debby Wharton (left) and Lyle Warrick look over early Lake County census records for clues to the Holzworth Cemetery.

Forgotten cemetery in Merrillville

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The setting for this report takes place however on the 80-plus acres bordered by Merrillville Road on the west, U.S. 30 on the north, and including the K-Mart property on the east, then south to encompass about 80 acres. Mathias bought this property from the U.S. government on Jan. 18, 1860. Then President James K. Polk's name is on the deed. This land was owned at one time by the Holzworts, Bitzers, and Wagonblasts, in which the middle is located the cemetery. The original homestead reached as far west as the Art Hill Ford property at one time, and also included the property where the Southlake Professional Center is today.

On this land, it is believed that Mathias raised his family. He first married German-born Rosina Scoon who died in 1856, before he legally owned the property where she is buried.

His second wife was Mary who was born in Hanover, England.

Rosina was also listed as Rosa in one old record, and the name Holzworth was found to be spelled several different ways.

I believe that Mathias raised at least eight children. The daughters were Hannah and Magdalena, both died young; Mary, Rebecca, and Christiana (Smith) Holzworth. Christiana may have been married before, and was now living back at home. She was born in Ohio and is 28 years old at this time.

Other ages of the children in 1860 are Mary, 6, born in Illinois, George, 4, born in Maine, and Rebecca who may have been born in Ross Township age 1.

Rebecca's birth place was listed as Indiana. Of the two oldest boys, Christian is 24 years old and owns property (\$250 worth) in Ohio.

Gottlieb, also born in Ohio, was 18 years old.

Possibly another daughter, Caroline, shows up later in the records. She married a neighbor, John Beckley, and soon moved to Minnesota.

A farmer and neighbor, Canadian-born Isaac Pierce, handled the affairs of Mathias

Holzworth. Pierce is listed at 33 years old in 1860, and was the area notary.

Ten years later in 1870, Mathias is going on 72, and his wife Mary is 62 years old. That year's census shows that Mathias owns \$2,600 in land, and \$560 in personal belongings, possibly today's equivalent of a goodly amount of land, and a nice place to live.

The 1870 Holzworth household lists yet another daughter 30 years old Rosina (Schroeder) and her two daughters Emile, 10, in school, and Rosina, 6.

Mrs. Rosina (Holzworth) Schroeder, who married Charles Schroeder April 8, 1856, is listed as insane in the 1870 census.

Charles Schroeder died in Crown Point at age 70 on Jan. 23, 1901.

A 15 year old farm hand, William Voss, born in Mecklenburg, Germany, also is living in the Mathias Holzworth home.

Who was Gottlieb Holzworth?

The 1870 census now lists just a few doors away from Mathias, the Gottlieb Holzworth family. Gottlieb, following in his father's footsteps, also becomes a wealthy farmer and landowner. The value of his estate in 1870 is \$4800 plus \$1,000 in personal belongings.

His May 27, 1866, wedding to Sarah Booth of New York, produces two children. Charles E., now 3 years old, and Estella, age 1, both of whom were born in Indiana, and probably in Ross Township.

In the 1880 census taken by well-known John C. Iddings, Charles is now 13. There is a daughter, Alice, 10, and Alberta, 9.

At this point we should mention that the name Holzworth as we now spell it, also was listed as Hultzwart, Holesworth, or Holwarth.

We found a William Holeswart in Hammond married to Ann Bernard in 1920.

There was a John Hoakworth who was born in Canada in Feb. 1875, and was living in Hammond around 1900 working as a railroad laborer.

We also found an Elizabeth

Holesworth listed in the 1788-1810 New London, Conn., settlement records. This woman was listed as a recipient of a federal land grant.

These grants were usually given in return for service in lieu of pay in the Army.

Many of these grants were for property in Ohio, which aided in the settlement and migration of people to the Midwest.

How these people fit in the family, is not known. But one source stated that people with similar last names were receiving the wrong mail in Hammond in the 1950's. A check with several county and city offices revealed that there was only one family named Holzworth now living in the 1870 census.

But getting back to Gottlieb, he like his father began to buy and sell large amounts of property. But by 1880, his name is no longer on the plat books of that year. And possibly he died soon after.

But before this time, he appears to be making large profits in real estate. He sold his favorite orchard to his father Mathias around June 10, 1864. This property was around the northeast corner of the intersection of Taft Street and U.S. 30, behind Johnny Pawis. Either one or both of them were soldiers for a short time, but continued selling land after service. During this time, members of the family marry; here is a partial list:

Christiana Holzworth, daughter of Mathias, married Conrad Bitzer Dec. 26, 1864. Bitzer owned the adjoining 80 acres to the south of the Holzworth property, and some possibly across the westside of Merrillville Road.

Christiana died Sept. 8, 1917, in Merrillville, by far outliving her husband. Her obit appeared in the Sept. 13, 1917, edition of the Register, and a day later in The Lake County Star. The Bitzers had at least 7 children. They were Caroline, Christiana, Lizzie, Lillian, Lidie, David (possibly born in 1875) John and Densire. They were all between 1 to 14 years old, according to the 1880 census.

The oldest daughter, Caroline (Carrie) married John W. Wagenblast on Feb. 11, 1886. Lidie married David F. Dean on Oct. 14, 1912, and Lizzie tied the knot with William Lau Jan. 1, 1897. And Lillian married Adolph Ohren on July 25, 1918, according to records on file at the Lake County library.

Carrie's husband, John, was a watchman at a packing house.

For many years there appeared a long narrow strip of property on the county assessor's plat books belonging to the Wagenblast family, south of the Holzworth land.

The marriage of Carrie Bitzer and John W. Wagenblast yielded 8 children, Florence, Cassie, Ruth, Earl, Wesley, Calvin, Lillian, and Eleanor. This was the fourth generation of the Wagenblast Family.

Our own Carl F. Wagonblast (note spelling) and Harry Wagonblast are of the sixth generation of Wagonblasts. Carl is employed by Crown Feed, while Harry works for the Crown Point Postoffice.

Still living of the fourth generation Wagonblasts are the widow of Wesley, Esther of Hammond, and Wesley's sister Eleanor now living in Colorado. There are many other members of the large Wagonblast family elsewhere around the country.

During further investigation, another Holzworth family turned up. Presently Ernest and Elma Holzworth reside in Hammond. Ernest is retired from the steel mills. His father, Phillip, who was born Oct. 10, 1871, in Germany, came to the United States in 1900. He married Margaret, who passed away about 10 years ago.

Phillip was killed in 1917 in a freak motorcycle accident in downtown Hammond. The only way to connect this family to Gottlieb and Mathias is that possibly Phillip who was also born in Germany, may have been related to the family. Phillip's father, John, and mother, Carlina Voltz, also were born in Germany.

Between 1860-1880, the Holzworths worked in farming and real estate sales. During this time, much property was traded between them.

On Feb. 11, 1873, Mathias sold to Gottlieb what appears to be the remainder of his

assets in Lake County. This included several lots in the Holzworth addition, and the Merrillville Road property (80 acres) previously mentioned.

Gottlieb received the back 45 acres of the property, which includes K-Mart, for the sum of \$5 from his father.

For \$5, Christiana Bitzer received the land where the professional center sets and the front properties along Merrillville Road.

Gottlieb first received an 8-acre frontage on U.S. 30.

After this transaction, he bought Christiana's property for \$300 on July 1864.

Other inherited properties became objects of discussion in the old Lake County Court of Common Pleas. Gottlieb and his relatives squabbled over his father's estate until 1880 when he finally bought the rest of the property.

This included all of the land that Mathias had originally bought from the government. Next, he sold 22 acres to a neighbor, George C. Dutton. The property was located on the west side of Merrillville Road.

On Sept. 4, 1872, Gottlieb sells the half acre tract of the cemetery property for \$1 to Mathias probably because his father's first wife and daughters were the only ones buried there.

Provisions in the deed provide that a wagon road 1 rod wide, (now 82nd Place) be given to Mathias forever for access to the cemetery.

By 1880, Mathias passed on.

June 19 of that year, the widow of Mathias, Mary, (some records say Maria) now living in Chicago, sells all of her interest to Gottlieb. This included the 8-acre frontage originally sold to Mathias by Christiana. This land was tied up in court for a short time. The land is located on U.S. 30, across from what is now RV sales and camping equipment store. The quit deed also transferred 8 acres on Merrillville Road in front of the cemetery to Gottlieb from heirs Caroline Beckley, Maria Holzworth and Christiana Bitzer.

Gottlieb fought against any land being left to his sister Rosina in the Court of Common Pleas.

The 1880 plat books show that Gottlieb is in complete control of 143.7 acres.

On May 22, 1880, Gottlieb and his wife, Sarah, sell all of his father's property in sections 19, 21 and part of 22 to Julius A. Demmon. The land was sold for \$4,463 dollars, but did not include the burial spot and road that leads to it.

That parcel remained in Gottlieb's name, and still does today.

Incidentally, Demmon paid \$2,400 in back mortgages on the property in order to receive it.

The document was certified

by Amos Allman, notary, and Richard Price, recorder.

Demmon later sold the property to John DuBrevil, and later to John Hein.

In 1885 after Gottlieb's death or divorce, (not known) his wife Sarah sells their last bit of property near 49th Avenue to Amos Horlon.

Mrs. Holzworth now resides in Adams County, Nebraska.

After the 1920's, the land was broken into smaller tracts. But each time the land was sold, the cemetery remained separate.

The adjoining land today is primarily held in trust, and partly owned by Tony Qualizza, a Merrillville businessman.

Sometime ago, the cemetery was discussed at a Merrillville Town Board meeting. It was reported that the cemetery was in the way of progress, and since no one had been buried there for more than 100 years, the question arose whether the owners of the adjacent property could level it.

Mrs. Walter Catlow of the Ross Township assessor's office, said many area residents expressed that the cemetery should be saved.

The next logical move was to find and alert the possible heirs to the property of its continuing deteriorating condition. Mrs. Esther Wagonblast and Mrs. Eleanor Johnstone were then contacted.

Both thought that something should be done to save the cemetery, and plan to seek out other heirs to decide what to do.

Ross Township trustee Robert Luckiewicz said the township would accept the cemetery and maintain it, if it were properly deeded to Ross Township.

Cleaning up the site may uncover additional graves and additional information.

Hopefully these two heirs, and any others that may turn up, will begin the necessary legal action to save the cemetery from destruction.

If it is saved, a victory will be won, by DAR members, the Holzworth Family, and many local history buffs.

Cemeteries